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NF94-199 Making Choices About Salvaging Flood Damaged or Wet Furniture

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Making Choices About Salvaging Flood Damaged or Wet Furniture

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Furniture pieces need immediate attention to prevent mildew and odors after a flood. Before starting to salvage flood-damaged furniture, decide which pieces are worth restoring. Consider the extent of damage, cost of the item, sentimental and antique value and cost of restoration. Check to see if your insurance allows partial value on flood-damaged furniture. Decide whether you can have the items professionally cleaned and repaired or whether you have the time and skills to safely do the job.

Microorganisms such as bacteria, molds and other fungi from floodwater that are not apparent at the time of the flood can remain on wood and other surfaces if they are not cleaned appropriately. Fungi may range in color from black to grey to white or may be yellow, orange, or red. When cleaning flood soaked items, wear rubber gloves and eye protection.

Solid Wood Pieces

Do not try to force open swollen drawers or doors. If possible take off the back and remove as many drawers and other parts as you can to increase air circulation. Outdoors, wash off mud with water as soon as possible to remove any debris and mold or mildew. Wipe with a one-half rubbing (isopropyl) alcohol and one-half water solution, or denatured alcohol and water solution, to kill any mold or mildew that may not have been removed with the water. Dab dry or dry with a soft cloth.

Air dry all items **slowly** inside to minimize cracking and splitting. Forced drying using heaters may cause uneven drying resulting in warping or cracking of wood. If the doors or drawers are swollen, do not try to remove until they are dry. For best results, dry the furniture under a cover such as plastic while providing good air circulation. Swelling, warping, splitting, cracking, or discoloration of surface coatings may result. Keep humidity levels as low as possible and air circulating to prevent mold from forming.

Veneered Pieces

Clean using the same process as for solid wood pieces. When drying, place veneered surfaces under weights to prevent the veneer from detaching. If pieces loosen, detach, or fall off, keep them for replacement when the entire object is dry. It may be best to keep items out of the direct sunlight.

Removing White Spots

Furniture that has not been submerged may have developed white spots or a whitish film or cloudiness from dampness. These spots may be removed using one of several methods, depending on the type of finish. TEST them in an inconspicuous area. Start with any furniture cleaner or polish you have on hand to see if it will remove the whitish film. Other alternatives include rubbing the piece with a cloth wrung from paint thinner (mineral spirits), or a 1:1 solution of household ammonia and water, or wipe with turpentine. After the item has been cleaned, polish with a furniture restorer or polish intended for the type of finish on the wood.

Upholstered Pieces

It is recommended that upholstered furniture damaged by flood water should probably be discarded unless it is an antique or very valuable. If a piece is salvaged, it should be reupholstered and interior fillings replaced to sanitize from contaminated flood water. Because reupholstering is expensive, get an estimate from a professional before cleaning and restoring the piece to determine if it is worth salvaging.

If you attempt to salvage the piece yourself, take it outside and spray the furniture with water to remove mud, debris, and mold or mildew. Remove the cushions, and allow the furniture to dry. Once the fabric is dry, brush any loose dirt and mold or mildew with a broom or soft brush.

To prevent mold or mildew from growing, shampoo the fabric with upholstery shampoo and wipe it with cloth wrung from a disinfectant solution such as a 1:1 solution of rubbing (isopropyl) alcohol and water or denatured alcohol and water. When cleaning the furniture, the stuffing will need to be checked for mildew. Throw out any cotton stuffing. Stuffing of other materials may be able to be cleaned and reused depending on the nature of the damage and the type of water damage (dirty contaminated flood water or clean rain water). Consult an upholsterer for advice.

Partially Upholstered Pieces

Remove detached seating. Clean the wooden portion of the piece according to the process for solid wood pieces and the seating according to the process for upholstered pieces.

Safety

Use safe procedures to protect eyes, hands, and mouth. When cleaning flood damaged items, wear rubber gloves and a mask suited to the chemicals being used. If the item may have been contaminated with toxic chemicals such as concentrated pesticides, other unknown toxic materials, or sewage, do not attempt to salvage it. While efforts to salvage flood damaged items are important, salvaging should not be done at the expense of human health and safety.

<p>Note: The information is intended as general guidelines for water damaged furniture. Damage from cleaning using water and disinfectants may result. For very valuable items and antiques, consult a furniture conservator or museum curator.</p>
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Use Cleaning Products Safely - Read Labels

Read all labels for use, storage, and safety; work outdoors. Generally turpentine and paint thinner are relatively safe solvents. However, work only in good ventilation where there are no electric sparks or open flames, preferably outdoors.

Test the solvent on the object first as the solvent may soften or remove the wood finish. Solvents can be dangerous to people. Solvent vapors can irritate eyes, skin and respiratory tract and cause headache, dizziness, confusion, nausea and fatigue. You may want to select a commercial furniture cleaner and restorer product found in the hardware, grocery stores or lumberyards.

Cleaning Flood-Damage Wood Furniture	
Mineral Spirits	Petroleum spirits, a substitute for turpentine that is flammable and toxic. Sometimes labeled paint thinner.
Denatured Alcohol	Ethanol that is flammable and a dangerous fire risk
Rubbing Alcohol	Isopropyl alcohol that is flammable, dangerous fire risk, and toxic
Turpentine	Solvent that is combustible and toxic

Keeping Records

Before undertaking the cleaning task, contact your insurance company to determine the extent of insurance coverage, if any, and what records, photos or examples you may need to keep for proof. Your insurance company may know of businesses that specialize in cleaning water-damaged items.

Adapted in part from:

Munson, D. & Hedrick, A. (August, 1993). How to Save Upholstered, Furniture, Carpet, Bedding. Manhattan, KS: Kansas State University, Cooperative Extension Service.

Stone, J. & Yearns, M. (August, 1993). Making Choices About Cleaning Wet Carpet. Ames, IA: Iowa State University, University Extension.

For additional information, contact your Cooperative Extension office:

HEG88-235 Selecting Case Goods - Wood
HEG88-236 Selecting Upholstered Furniture
EC 88-422 Household Cleaning and Laundry Products: Which one for the Job?

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